

Session 1: Skills → Memory → 1 - Essentials

This is essentially a springboard for launching a lesson or assembly on memory. The slide I use is in the memory assembly on your CD and in the presentation on memory. Here is a guide about what to say on each bullet point:

A few things we know about the brain!

How to activate the brain
(Reticular Activating System – ‘new car syndrome’)

The magic number 7
– a tale from Sweden!

The value of humour

Primacy and recency effect

Your natural limits (ACS = age
+/- 2 mins)



Reticular Activating System

This is the brain's 'noticing' function and essential to activate this at the start of every lesson or our brain will not be ready to take in new information. Describe a typical entry into a lesson where students are still full of their discussions from break or lunch, minds filled with the most important things about school like who has just started going out with whom! At this point, students have to find a way to switch their brains on to learning. An example of when your brain is switched on to noticing – you decide to buy a new car and really want to buy a red car this time. Suddenly all you notice on the roads is just how many red cars there are – your RAS is switched on to red cars. Students have to meet the teacher with the best possible chance of learning new things and they do that by consciously 'switching on' – all senses activated to the learning in question at the start of the lesson.

The magic number 7

Research into memory functioning has led a lot of worth to be placed on the number 7 as the ideal and maximum number of different pieces of information that the brain can take in and hold at any one time (if you have done the 're-conscientisation' activity you can refer them back to their natural instinct to break the word down into smaller parts for memorisation) The urban myth about Sweden (and it is a complete myth) is that they ran out of number combinations for their car number plate system so they added an 8th digit and the crime rate suddenly soared because no-one could remember the number plates when they tried to report the getaway cars to the police. This is complete rubbish but it serves as an excellent lead into the next bullet point – the value of humour in memory.

The value of humour

Things that are funny stick in our memory so we should use this as a strategy when learning new things – i.e. fix the knowledge whether it's a concept in science or a new word in languages into our brains with something humorous, either a visual image or a funny sound association. Give the example of a way to remember 'poulet' as the two things a chicken does (i.e. poo and lay!)

Primacy and recency effect

Research has shown that we remember best what we learn first and last. (You could demonstrate this by reading them out a list of 15 numbers and then let them write them down – the middle numbers will get forgotten) One way we should use this information is when we learn new words for a test – putting the hardest words at the top and very bottom of our list and the easy ones in the middle does improve our ability to retain them. (and so does the fact that we have thought carefully about which words are hard and which words are easy.

Your natural limits (ACS = age +/- 2 mins)

Up until adulthood (it doesn't work for us oldies!) your average concentration span is your age plus or minus two years. Relate this to the age of the group you're talking to and say 'So, if you're 13 then the best you can hope to concentrate for without drifting off is 15 mins and it might be a few as 11 minutes' Think about the implications of this for a lesson of an hour. It has implications for them when revising, when doing their learning homework and also in lesson time, when they need to be aware of having to consciously re-focus themselves.